

Autism and entrepreneurship: pushing back against stereotypes

Openly autistic entrepreneurs often face both admiration and discrimination, with their traits being heralded simultaneously as both “superpowers” and their “Achilles’ heel”. This creates unrealistic expectations, by placing autistic founders on a pedestal, while also upholding harmful and ableist stereotypes.

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This discrimination is then compounded by the very narrow understanding of what an “autistic entrepreneur” looks and acts like, i.e. usually white, male, lacking empathy, controlling, but also a genius savant who will do anything to succeed.

For example, when people are asked to imagine an “autistic entrepreneur”, they are likely to think of someone like tech billionaire Elon Musk. Musk’s autistic traits - lateral thinking, an intense interest in solving a problem, systems thinking, an obsessive attention to detail - may have helped him become one of the world’s most successful entrepreneurs. But by openly sharing his autism diagnosis Musk has become a target of ableist discrimination. In 2022, for example, a video of a senior *Twitter* exec went viral, which called Musk a “looney tune”, “mentally handicapped” and “special needs” on account of him being autistic.

You don’t have to agree with Musk’s views, the way he runs his business or his Twitter/X tirades to still feel concerned by the ableism that he is targeted with. Conflating Musk’s autistic identity with, or using it as an excuse for, his problematic behaviour causes further harm to the

neurodivergent community.

To shift away from this harmful way of thinking, we need to recognise the duality of autism, that autistic traits can manifest both positively and negatively. And because of this, we need to create intentional and supportive environments that nurture autistic individual's strengths and the resources they need to succeed without overlooking the real struggles they face. We also need to recognise that neurodiversity shows up in different people in different ways. That it affects women and non-binary people, people of colour, people with different socio-economic backgrounds and education, people with other disabilities.

As an autistic, female entrepreneur of colour, I have had my own battles with the duality of autistic traits, how they shape my experience of entrepreneurship and how that may differ from that of people with other backgrounds and identities. As I have learnt more about myself and how my neurodiversity presents itself, I have put into place supportive strategies that recognise both the "good" and "darker" side of my personal autistic traits. This practical and realistic approach plays to my strengths and helps me manage challenges I face both while I'm building my tech startup [COGS AI](#) and in my personal life.

These are things that have worked for me personally and may be helpful guidelines to other autistic entrepreneurs as a starting point. But as neurodiversity affects each person differently I would encourage readers to experiment and find out what works for them.

Special interests

When autistic or other neurodivergent people have an intense focus on specific topics or hobbies. Spending time on those interests or hobbies brings them joy and can have a soothing effect.

My special interest in solving healthcare issues for neurodivergent people is more than just a job, it's a passion that consumes me. Constantly reading, ideating and immersing myself in this mission feels fulfilling and joyful, like an intrinsic part of who I am. However, this intense focus can sometimes lead me to neglect other aspects of my life that I value, such as spending time with friends and family. Additionally, the tendency to prioritise work over taking breaks can result in burnout, setting a poor example as a leader and negatively impacting my company's culture. To counterbalance this, I've learned to be disciplined about taking holidays and time-off, not sacrificing social events for non-urgent work and carving out time for intentional self-care.

Alexithymia

Something many neurodivergent people experience, where they have difficulty cognitively interpreting emotional (and sometimes physical) signals their body is sending them.

For me, I experience alexithymia primarily around “negative” emotions or states. An example of this is that I rarely have anxiety or feel scared (even if my body is releasing stress hormones), which makes me fearless in the face of challenges or in situations that most people would back away from. The flipside is that it also means I don't recognise danger signals or when my body is in a negative or unhealthy state, potentially leading to unchecked stress and burnout. While I haven't found a perfect solution, I rely on regular exercise as a preventative measure to manage stress hormones and maintain emotional balance.

Attention to detail

Known as “weak central coherence” in academic speak (I stay away from the term as it's very deficit-based), this describes a perceptual-cognitive style that autistic people often have where they strongly focus on the

individual details within a scene, dataset or collection of information.

My attention to detail has been instrumental in producing high-quality outputs for my startup, giving us a competitive edge even as a small team. However, it can also make me want to micromanage other people's work or do tasks myself rather than delegate them to others, which is unsustainable and hinders collaboration. I've learned to trust my colleagues to deliver quality work, even if their approach differs from mine.

Pattern recognition

The ability, often heightened in autistic people due to differences in brain structure, to quickly perceive patterns, both visually and between concepts or sources of information.

For me, pattern recognition most strongly manifests as “systems thinking” or being able to view a concept as one part of the larger pattern (or system) in which it sits. My systems thinking approach combined with my attention to detail means I consider problems from multiple levels, leading to better understanding of a problem which in turn leads to better solutions. So far, I haven't experienced any disadvantages associated with this trait ☐.

Lateral thinking

A non-linear way of solving problems and connecting ideas and concepts, associated with neurodivergent ways of processing information.

Neurodivergent people are overrepresented in the creative industries, often because their ability to think “outside the box” is seen as an asset in those industries. Lateral thinking is also a massive advantage in entrepreneurship, helping me deconstruct and solve problems in novel

and creative ways, free from conventional constraints. However, conveying my cognitive journey to others can be challenging, making it difficult for them to understand how or why I've come to a solution. To address this, I discuss my ideas with a neurotypical person who knows me well and understands how I think (usually my co-founder) who can help me shape my thoughts and provide feedback on clarity before I present an idea to the wider team or external stakeholders.

By embracing the duality of my neurodiversity, I've developed strategies to support my work and personal life. But to shift the dial, change needs to happen at both an individual and societal level. At an individual level, neurodiverse people need to be kinder to themselves, to know when to ask for help and to try to intentionally create environments that not only help them but help the other people around them understand their needs.

But this responsibility cannot lie solely with neurodiverse people. A more inclusive approach must be adopted at a societal level, in the policies and practices we embed in our workplace cultures and beyond. From advocating for accommodations to building solutions tailored for the neurodiverse experience, society as a whole must recognise and embrace the unique perspectives and contributions of neurodiverse folks. Only through collective effort can we create environments where everyone can thrive.

Zareen Ali is the cofounder of [COGS AI](#).